FOIBLES OF OUR POLITICAL FOOD

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WASHINGTON.—The political activities of the American people are practically ceaseless. National, state and local elections follow one another in unbroken round. It is held, seemingly, that in short terms of office lies the greater safety for free institutions.

It has been asserted and argued to the limit of patience and endurance in Washington and elsewhere that the campaigning times, with their attendant excitement, coming as they do with barely a space between, tend to the breaking of the health of the business life. Prosperity, however, has been so generally a part of the country's history that little heed is given to the complaining cry. The fear of a possible instability of institutions that might follow a change has outweighed the fear of a possible but temporary commercial instability.

In Massachusetts where, because of the supposed effect of the traditional habit of thought, the people might be expected to look with favor on a long tenure of public office, the governor of the state is elected yearly. The mayor of the city of Boston also holds office only for a twelvemonth. Massachusetts and Boston are no weaklings commercially. There has been, however, a tendency in the states of the Union to lengthen the terms of the chief executives. That which seems wise to-day would have been deemed folly half a century ago. The people have found that they can trust themselves to keep away from the pit of apathy for three or four years and that all men are not possessed of dangerous ambitions.

The recurring talk of a term of six years for the president and the talk of senators for life terms is probably but talk for talk's sake. Anything that has politics for a basis is of interest to the live American and in the and each can back the name given with reasons that for which the advancer couldn't get a vote—not even his own.

American politics deal largely in futures. The naming of presidents is done so many thousands of times before the convention days that figures cannot keep the count. The question of the multitude that witnesses the oath taking of a president on the platform east of the capitol is: "Who will take the oath four years from to-day?" There are some thousands of individual members of the multitude who will be quick to give answer and each can back the given name with reasons that he believes all convincing. It is a great game and it makes for safety.

There never has been a time since Washington was inaugurated in the city of New York that the concerns of legislation, no matter how vital to the country, have been strong enough to keep politics and the matter of the presidential succession out of the people's minds. The American thrives on politics—proof enough, perhaps, that it is a healthy food.

There has been the ever-ready sneer at American methods of naming a president. Men who think none too well of popular government have said, until by reiteration they have come to believe their own words, that the politicians and the office holders (also politicians) do the president-naming for the people. It is a statement that bears no test. When Mr. Roosevelt began the outlining of his policies there was hardly a politician in the land who approved. The members of congress who were friendly to the president's course could be counted with no knowledge of counting. Measures went through congress that the congressmen who voted aye loathed in their souls.

What was the reason of it all? The people themselves were voting, using unwilling but finally politically wise agents to do the voting for them. The man who wants to succeed himself in office has an eye and ear for his constituents. If he wants to commit political suicide he becomes temporarily blind and deaf. The force of public opinion was never more sharply shown than in the United States senate winter before last, when senator after senator voted for measures that three years ago they would openly have declared to be iniquitous, because they might disturb business interests, business interests being the interests of corporations which some people say sow little and reap plenteously.

As for the house of representatives, the men who stood against the presidential policies, still clinging to the belief that the majority of the people was not in sympathy with the administration, found out their mistake at the convention or later at the polls.

All this was a part and parcel of the plan of president-naming by the people. It is as certain as mundane things can be certain that if the politicians of either party and their allies succeed in thwarting the will of the voters at a national convention there is always the evening up place at the polls. The politicians, the men who make a business of politics, have a wisdom of their own, and they have a respect, though it be a selfish and a reluctant one, for that which the people are bent on doing.

If all the dire things had happened to this republic that politicians just before national conventions had predicted would happen to it if a man not their choice were elected president, there would not be a shred of liberty left in the land. The people, however, seem to be satisfied that they have the same kind of freedom that was the joyful possession of their forefathers. One of the arguments that was used against the nomination of Theodore Roosevelt for another term was that he had gathered unto himself most of the forces of government and that he had absorbed almost wholly the larger part of the functions of the legislative branch. It was a common enough thing in Washington last year and the year before to hear the words muttered about "one-man power" and the "republic's rapid road to despotism." Somehow or other there seemed to be a feeling that this was utterly new talk and that the supposed danger existed for the first time in the history of the country.

Two years ago a New York paper with an eye on Roosevelt opened its columns to a discussion of "Caesarism." The same New York paper years ago saw daily and nightly for wearisome month after wearisome month the ghost of "Caesarism." There is nothing new under the sun, even in the matter of ghosts.

When the Democrats of the country got together in convention in Baltimore in the year 1872 Caesarism and centralization stalked hourly through the hall arm in arm before the eyes of the affrighted delegates. The Liberal Republicans had held a convention in Cincinnati and had nominated Horace Greeley and B. Gratz Brown for president and vice-president. The Democrats had assembled at Baltimore to indorse the Liberal Republicans' ticket and to say things in their platform about General Grant and the Republican party generally.

No one probably will deny to-day that there were a hundred and one things in Grant's administration bad enough to have had some words not of praise said about them, but instead of actually specifying this thing or that thing the speakers of the Democratic convention were so carried away by the fear that the republic was to go the way and that an empire was to come into its own that they lost track of legislative matters that might have been criticised and held up to make the voters afraid the crowned wraith of "Caesarism."

It was 35 years ago that the ghost of Caesarism walked abroad in America. It walked again recently and there was just as much substance of the spirit as there was when August Belmont in the Democratic convention at Baltimore saw it striding through the convention hall.

In his speech at that Democratic convention Mr. Belmont said that Grant, aided by a corrupt congress, a congress from which all love of liberty had departed, was assuming all the functions of government of whatever kind, and that the bayonets of the military despotism already were flashing in the sun. The New Yorker declared that "Caesarism and centralization" were undermining the very foundations of our federal system and "sweeping away all constitutional bulwarks."

The republic, however, still lived and last year Democrats and many Republicans, 35 years after, were crying "Caesarism and centralization" and in the same breath declaring that all the constitutional bulwarks were being swept away. When the minds of those who "see things" got normal and the eyesight became clear, Caesarism and centralization were found somewhere far down the wind and the constitutional bulwarks were found to be as strong ribbed and as iron bound as ever. The country always goes to the devil in a thousand different ways just before the delegates to the great national conventions are gathered together.

In the Liberal Republican convention of 1872, held in the city of Cincinnati, there were things said about General Grant which made the things said in the Baltimore convention a little later seem tame. When Grant's name was mentioned in the convention the first time every man hissed and kept on hissing for the period usually allotted to the applause following the mention of some favored one. It was only seven years before this that Grant had received the surrender of Lee at Appomattox and yet here in a northern convention of men nearly every one of whom had been a Republican the name of the great soldier was greeted with the hisses not only of contempt but of hatred.

In the year 1892 the Democratic convention was held in a building erected for the purpose on the lake front in Chicago. Any man who attended this Democratic gathering will remember the building—"the Wigwam," as it was called. The roof of the Wigwam leaked. The smallest hole in it was the skylight. It was at the Wigwam convention that Grover Cleveland was nominated for the third time for the office of president. In th hotels for two or three days before the convention there were scores of men who were given over to the task of telling everybody who would listen that if the convention were to commit the unpardonable offense of nominating Grover Cleveland defeat awaited the Democratic party and if by any chance defeat were averted the election of Cleveland would bring disaster to the country.

The New York delegation, 72 men in number, was as a unit for the nomination of David Bennett Hill. The things that these New Yorkers said about Grover Cleveland, a citizen of their own state, would have been little less than astounding to some foreigners who did not understand the ways and byways of American politics. There was no crime which Mr. Cleveland had not committed. Even if the crimes could not be proved against him, there was not one chance in a universe of chances that he would carry New York state if he were nominated.

New York would have none of him. No person from Good Ground on the Atlantic to Buffalo on Lake Erie, it was said, had any liking in his heart for the only man who had led the Democratic hosts to victory since before the days of the civil war. The New Yorkers went into the convention hall and voted for Hill and with them in the voting were some forty-odd Democrats. Mr. Cleveland received 617 votes and his nomination immediatly was made unanimous.

The New York delegation went home. It forgot all the bad things it had said about Mr. Cleveland and if anybody was unkind enough to bring them to remembrance the answer was, "It was all in the game and we wanted Hill." The Democrats from Good Ground to Buffalo, Tammanyites and all, worked for the election of Grover Cleveland, and elected he was. If you hear anything about a candidate in a national convention from a delegate who opposes his nomination, don't believe it. After the convention is over the delegate himself will tell you he lied.

Early in the winter preceding the national conventions the members of the national committees of both great political parties meet to decide in which of the great cities this convention shall be held. Both committee meetings are called for the city of Washington for the greater convenience of the members, many of whom have official positions with the scene of their activities in the capital city.

In the years gone by the choice of the convention city was to some extent governed by political considerations. There was a set belief on the part of many of the committeemen that party advantage was to be gained by the naming of this city or [illegible]city as the place for the great gathering. Such th[illegible]s largely have passed and the national committees nowadays are more anxious to have a convention held in a city which has a hall properly arranged, big enough for the delegates and for a horde of spectators and safeguarded in every way against fire and other dangers.

Of course money enters into the matter as it enters into most matters of life. The national committeemen expect the city that is honored to bear the actual expenses of holding the convention. Just how much the business of a great town is benefited by the political gathering it is hard to state. Of course the hotels reap plenteously, but the great gain to a community comes from the example which the political convention sets for the delegates of other convention-holding bodies to follow.

From the moment that the lawmakers get together in Washington after a presidential election the next campaign is on. In the winter next preceding a convention there is more politics in the national city than there is legislation.

The effect of Washington politics is felt all over the Union and it is in the capital city largely that policies are framed and plans are laid against the day of the next national convention. Already the discussion in the capital is turning to the subject of the nominees for the next great national contest.

SOMETHING BETTER

Joseph H. Choate said at a recent dinner that within a few years (he was sure) all civilized nations would be compelled to arbitrate their quarrels, as for centuries all civilized men have been compelled to do.

"Patriotism—the glorious fourth—all that sort of thing is very good, indeed," said Mr. Choate, "but disarmament, universal peace, will be much better.

"In this splendid, peaceful future which is so near us, friends of war will seem as uncouth as a young man seemed the other day in my native Salem.

"This young man entered a drug store and said:

"'Gimme a brush.'

"'Very good, sir,' said the polite assistant. What kind of a brush? A toothbrush?'

"'Toothbrush? Naw!' snarled the young man. 'What would I want a toothbrush fur? Do ye think I've got hair on my teeth?'"